

DONALD DAVIDSON
THE POET AS STORYTELLER

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Happy the land where men hold dear
Myth that is truest memory,
Prophecy that is poetry.
—“Meditation on Literary Fame”

DONALD Davidson has long been known as one of the four principal Fugitives, together with John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, but he has too often been treated as the least of them. Now that his only novel, *The Big Ballad Jamboree* (1996), has been discovered and published, and now that there is a full-scale biography of him by Mark Royden Winchell, it is time to reassess Davidson's reputation as a writer, which is as impressive as that of any of his fellow Fugitives.

Davidson should at last be seen for what he was: a complete man of letters and a living contradiction of George Bernard Shaw's famous dictum, “Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.” He was a teacher and one of the best, but he also knew how to write, and, what is more, he knew how to teach others to write. The roster of distinguished writers who studied under Davidson at Vanderbilt in his forty-year career includes Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, Jesse Stuart, and Elizabeth Spencer, who in her memoir, *Landscapes of the Heart* (1998), also gives him credit for helping her find a publisher for her first novel. In fact, as both teacher and writer, Davidson was a leading figure in what we now call the southern literary renaissance.

Davidson was also a philosopher, since the Agrarians who followed the Fugitives were the most original American school of philosophers, at least as important in the intellectual

history of this country as the New England transcendentalists of the nineteenth century. Denis Donoghue has called the Fugitive-Agrarians "the American *intelligentsia* of their time." They were called less complimentary names, of course, after they published the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930, when many charged them with being reactionaries; but today, strangely enough, they have come to seem more like progressives, expressing an early perspective on what is now called environmentalism, and sounding the first alarm that the delicate balance between man and nature has been upset, an issue of growing importance throughout the world. Agrarianism links Donald Davidson with Thomas Jefferson as a southern thinker, and though Jefferson has suffered much lately from the charge of racism, he will survive that charge just as Davidson will survive it, because both were men of principle. Agrarianism has slowly come to be recognized for what it was, not an impractical and outdated program for returning to the farm, much less a wrongheaded defense of slavery, but instead a permanent reminder of human dependence on nature and of the fact that for man, as Davidson said, "nature is an eternal balancing factor in his art." Few Americans are farmers now, but whether we are farmers or factory workers or computer technologists, we still depend for our sustenance as well as our aesthetic sense on nature. Davidson's essay in *I'll Take My Stand*, "A Mirror for Artists," argues that Agrarianism is the perennial basis for the arts and literature. He must have been right, because today Agrarianism is more honored than discredited, and his advocacy of it may indeed be one of his claims to permanent fame.

But though he was both a teacher and a philosopher, his major claim was as a writer. He had a special gift for telling a story, whether he was writing prose or poetry. Storytelling is one of the oldest human activities, and storytellers have been honored since Homer for being among the wisest members of the human race. Davidson was not a Homer; he did not write epics. But he did write narrative poems, narrative essays, books of history, and one complete novel; and he took

exception to what many of his contemporaries, especially the poets, were doing, since they followed Edgar Allan Poe and the French Symbolists in thinking that stories were passé, that the writer should create an effect, set a mood, paint a picture with words. Davidson had less in common with American expatriate poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, his most notable contemporaries, than with Robert Frost, the distinguished New Englander, whose poems were often narratives like Davidson's poems. It is not surprising that Frost and Davidson became good friends at the Breadloaf Mountain Summer School for Writers in Vermont, where both lived and taught for many years, and they had much in common despite their regional differences, for both were Agrarians brought up to believe, as Jefferson did, that those who work in the soil are the chosen people of God. Frost the New England Agrarian created the farmer-poet as his spokesman; Davidson the southern Agrarian told stories.

In the classes he taught at Vanderbilt, Davidson's highest praise for a piece of writing was that it was "substantial." He bestowed it on very few writers. Among modern poets he thought Yeats and Hardy and Frost were "substantial," because they wrote of their regions—Yeats of Ireland, Hardy of southwestern England or "Wessex," and Frost of New England—the part of the earth each poet knew best. To Davidson "substantial" meant elemental, founded upon truth and honesty, and it is a word that applies to his own best writing. It too was substantial, grounded solidly in the American South; and it is therefore enduring, not as widely known as the works of Yeats or Hardy or Frost, but universal in import even while being regional in perspective. Davidson was unabashedly a southern writer, and his South was the storyteller's South, as his best poems and essays and his only novel demonstrate.

Davidson's South needs to be properly identified. It was not the plantation South, Faulkner's South—the archetypal South to many readers, because Faulkner is rightly acknowledged as the champion southern storyteller. Davidson's South

was as authentic as Faulkner's, but it was the South of the pioneer farm, the family homestead, not the large plantation. There race was really not an issue because the families were all European in origin, not African or Native American. If Davidson became a segregationist later, his real allegiance was to the family farm, which typically owned no slaves but was self-sufficient through the efforts of generations of hard-working people. When we read *The Big Ballad Jamboree*, for instance—and we can read it only now, not when Davidson was alive, because it was discovered and published long after his death—we are aware of deeply rooted family relations to the land. They go back further than the settlement of the Great Smoky Mountains, which is the setting for the novel, back to the Scottish and Irish and English ancestors who brought their songs and stories to the southern Appalachians. Davidson wrote his novel about what today is known as American country music, but it was an oral tradition long before the country-music industry grew up in Nashville to exploit it and profit from it. Davidson could write about the original country music because he knew its heritage, because one of his favorite courses at Vanderbilt was the history of the ballad and folk song, which he could trace back to their origins in the British Isles.

For Davidson storytelling was the domestic art that kept families together through time, and in becoming a storyteller himself he was being true to his own ancestral roots. It helped him overcome his chief weakness as a writer, which was a tendency to be too didactic, "too preachy," as his student and fellow Agrarian Andrew Lytle used to say. When Davidson launched into a story, he concentrated on the characters and events he was telling about. Such superb poems as "Sanctuary," "Hermitage," "Lee in the Mountains," and "The Last Charge" get their force from Davidson's ability to tell a story, and the same is true of his best essays, "Still Rebels, Still Yankees," "A Mirror for Artists," and both volumes of his history of *The Tennessee* (1946, 1948), as well as the whole of his novel.

One of Davidson's best poems in fact owes much to the old Scottish ballad "Lord Randall," which Davidson would sing unaccompanied when he was teaching it in his class on the ballad. It was startling to hear his normally soft voice break into song, but one of his many talents as a teacher was that he could sing the ballads he taught, and go on to analyze them in the best New Critical fashion. "Lord Randall" consists of a dialogue between a mother and son, each stanza ending with the refrain, "Lord Randall, my son." Davidson called his poem "Randall, My Son," dropping the ancient title but keeping the warning tone of the mother, which in the old ballad she adopts when she learns through her son's gruesome story—the old ballads were often bloody and violent—that he has murdered her husband and that he blames her for urging him to commit the crime that will plague him through life. Davidson's latter-day southern version of this ballad echoes the refrain, "Randall, my son," but changes the setting from a doomed Scottish estate to a home in the rural South, where the son returns after the Civil War, a defeated soldier in a lost cause, to be reminded by his mother that he must pass on his memory to his son some day, so the defeat will not be forgotten, nor will the ruin that follows it. I can remember Davidson's voice intoning the poem himself at a Fugitives' reunion on the Vanderbilt campus in 1955, still full of smoldering resentment almost a hundred years after the Civil War ended in the defeat of the South, and full too of the mother's admonishing tone in the old Scottish ballad, so that there was a double meaning in the poem for those who knew the ballad of "Lord Randall" as well as Davidson's "Randall, My Son":

Randall, my son, before you came just now
I saw the lean vine fingering at the latch,
And through the rain I heard the poplar bough
Thresh at the blinds it never used to touch,
And I was old and troubled overmuch,
And called in the deep night, but there was none
To comfort me or answer, Randall, my son.

But mount the stair and lay you down till morn.
The bed is made—the lamp is burning low.
Within the changeless room where you were born
I wait the changing day when you must go.
I am unreconciled to what I know,
And I am old with questions never done
That will not let me slumber, Randall, my son.

Randall, my son, I cannot hear the cries
That lure beyond familiar fields, or see
The glitter of the world that draws your eyes.
Cold is the mistress that beckons you from me.
I wish her sleek hunting might never come to be—
For in our woods where deer and fox still run
An old horn blows at daybreak, Randall, my son.

And tell me then, will you some day bequeath
To your own son not born or yet begotten,
The lustre of a sword that sticks in sheath,
A house that crumbles and a fence that's rotten?
Take, what I leave, your own land unforgotten;
Hear, what I hear, in a far chase new begun
An old horn's husky music, Randall, my son.

In Davidson's poem the mother tells her son never to forget the defeat of the South in the Civil War, quite a departure from the mother's discovery, in the old Scottish ballad, that her son blames her for his murdering his father. So Davidson has converted the theme of the story from guilt for a family crime into the "creed of memory," a phrase he used later in his most memorable poem about the Fugitives, "Lines Written for Allen Tate on his Sixtieth Anniversary." Furthermore the mother in Davidson's poem is no Lady Macbeth, urging her son to commit patricide, but is the faithful parent of a faithful son, who may have been guilty of killing Yankees in the war because they were enemies, but has not been guilty of killing his own father. And so, in Davidson's new version of the old ballad, he has relieved the characters of any crime

and has also changed the poem from a dialogue between mother and son to a monologue by the mother, with the son silently listening to her words. Davidson has retold the story of Randall to fit the history of the South, and in so doing he has made it a worthy successor to the old ballad.

Donald Davidson's work is full of echoes like this; indeed he was a modernist in spite of himself, sometimes mocking Pound and Eliot for their experiments with language, yet fascinated by their American use of ancient traditions to give their poetry resonance. Davidson was not an ironist by intent but by necessity, forced against his will to recognize that traditionalism could survive only by wit, not by custom. He used many past traditions in his work to cast a harsh light on the traditionless present in which he lived. Writing an editorial once in the *Fugitive* magazine, he noted that "the strangest thing in contemporary poetry is that innovation and conservatism exist side by side." The traditions that meant most to him were the classical Greek and Roman myths, the old Scottish and English ballads, and the American Civil War. For Davidson the stories of Ulysses and Aeneas paralleled the American immigrant experiences of wandering and exile and longing to return home, while the ballads told of bloody battles often leading to defeat, especially the Scottish defeat by the English, a historical analogy for him to the defeat of the South by the North in the American Civil War. There was American historical tradition as well, that of the pioneer homestead in the wilderness, where only Indians had lived before white people came, which he transformed into the Sanctuary and the Hermitage of his poetry, calling it "the secret refuge of our race." Like other great modernists, such as Joyce and Faulkner, Davidson often ironically contrasts a noble past with an ignoble present—as he does most satirically in "On a Replica of the Parthenon," a scathing critique of Nashville's attempt to be the Athens of the South by reproducing a masterpiece of classical Greek architecture in a city park—even if his work in its totality is not the equal of their epic vision. What is not as obvious in his more distinguished contemporaries, however, is Davidson's sense that the tra-

dition, though weak, has not been completely fractured. For Davidson the pioneer home in the wilderness was a living memory, and his storytelling gift was a link with that heritage.

"Sanctuary" and "Hermitage" are two of his best poems, because he had a deep feeling for the rural ancestral South and wanted to preserve it as long as possible, though he knew it was threatened by modern civilization which built factories and congregated in cities. Davidson was born in Campbellsville, Tennessee, a country village in Giles County, next to the Alabama border, in the heart of the Deep South; there is now a plaque in the Pulaski town square honoring two of the Fugitives, Davidson and Ransom, who were both natives of the same county. He was educated at the Branham and Hughes Academy in Spring Hill, Tennessee, a classical preparatory school south of Nashville, and at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, the state capital, where he lived most of his seventy-five years. When he wrote about the pioneer family farm of the South, he was writing about something he knew, although he was conscious that it was growing more remote, and was in danger of being forgotten. Much of his writing was a way of telling about the past so that it would endure in the present and even persist into the future, a vital link in the historical tradition which literature at its best provides.

He wrote two complementary poems about the South: in "Sanctuary" he is searching for a way to reclaim the family homestead in the wilderness, the very homestead which his ancestors in "Hermitage" had built long ago. Both poems are about making a home in nature, about living in an Agrarian setting that changes nature as little as possible for the good of man. And both are historical narratives written in a colloquial blank verse, picturing the South as it was when transplanted Europeans first came to settle in the New World and carve a home out of the wilderness.

"Sanctuary" begins in a monitory tone, "You must remember this when I am gone," telling a younger generation it must leave civilization behind and find the paths in the wilderness that "were your fathers' paths" into the mountains and the

woods where “your foe” cannot follow and you will discover “the secret refuge of our race.” The poem may be read as a post-Civil War exhortation to southerners to flee from the Yankees in defeat and recover what was once their stronghold in nature. But it may also be read as an address to city folk to go back to nature while there is still nature to be found unspoiled by man. In fact I think Davidson had both audiences in mind as he wrote his poem, giving it dual relevance to the defenders of the South as a homeland despite their defeat in the war, and to the conservationists and Agrarians who wanted to maintain a pristine wilderness despite the encroachments of industrialism and urbanization. The poem quickly becomes an exciting tale of discovery when it picks up a wilderness trail that was “a buffalo path once or an Indian road.” And finally it reaches the sanctuary of nature at the end of the trail:

Then a cliff
Breaks, where the trees are thickest, and you look
Into a cove, and right across, Chilhowee
Is suddenly there, and you are home at last.
Sweet springs of mountain water in that cove
Run always. Deer and wild turkey range.
Your kin, knowing the way, long there before you
Will have good fires and kettles on to boil,
Bough-shelters reared and thick beds of balsam.

The American Indian name *Chilhowee* tells us that we are in the Great Smoky Mountains, and that Davidson’s sanctuary is a real place, not an imaginary paradise. He goes on to mention names from the American Revolution, long before the Civil War, such as a British governor of the Carolinas, Tryon, and a British officer of the Revolution, Tarleton, and then Sam Houston, the Tennessean who went west to Texas and helped to found a new state, but whom Davidson remembers as “young Sam Houston” who lived with the Indians, “Reading Homer among the Cherokee.” Improbable as it may seem, Sam Houston did pursue his education in the wilderness, and

classical learning was part of the southern identity. But then Davidson goes even further back, to recall the Spanish explorer DeSoto, who may in his early travels through the New World wilderness have stumbled on this same place before anyone settled there. Nor does he stop there; he goes still further back, beyond history, when

this was a sacred place to all
Old Indian tribes before the Cherokee
Came to our eastern mountains. Men have found
Images carved in bird-shapes there and faces
Moulded into the great kind look of gods.

In his poem Davidson is connecting his family's natural sanctuary with all the human generations who had been there, Native Americans as well as Europeans, as if they were all indigenous to it and shared a common heritage. And in the moving final lines of his poem, Davidson expresses the joy of men who feel at home in nature, while at the same time he sounds an alarm that the sanctuary may be violated by other men who come to destroy it, since they have destroyed so much of nature already; he urges that the wilderness be enjoyed while it lasts, which will not be forever:

Or else, forgetting ruin, you may lie
On sweet grass by a mountain stream, to watch
The last wild eagle soar or the last raven
Cherish his brood within their rocky nest,
Or see, when mountain shadows first grow long,
The last enchanted white deer come to drink.

These lines are beautiful but also elegiac in tone, since they suggest that the sanctuary of nature is coming to an end, not simply from the destruction of war but from the destruction of civilization. There is a hidden irony in Davidson's title (as there is in the title of Faulkner's more famous novel, *Sanctuary*) that springs from those final lines, so appealing in their description of the unspoiled wilderness, yet so ominous in the

repeated word *last* that is applied to the eagle and the raven and the deer, creatures that may be driven away or hunted to extinction by human beings. Reading the poem today, with further generations of despoilers in our minds, we have to see it as a lesson in conservation that may not be learned in time to save what little is left of the wilderness. Davidson's poem remains an eloquent tribute to the balance between nature and man, the major theme of Agrarianism, as well as a reminder that this delicate balance is in danger of being permanently lost.

If "Sanctuary" is a post-Civil War poem about returning to the natural world after a defeat in the world of men, impelled by the need to find a home in nature again if nature itself can be saved from ruin, "Hermitage" is a pre-Civil War poem describing the original settlement that brought the pioneers into the new country, a recollection of the ancestral freehold in the wilderness from which later generations have descended. It is a story told in three parts about Davidson's own ancestors, who made the arduous journey from Virginia across the mountains into Tennessee before the Revolution and the Civil War. The first section, entitled "Descending Chestnut Ridge," places Davidson where his forefathers once had been, making his pilgrimage a "filial tribute" to their home, which he pictures as a clearing in the woods where smoke rises from the cabin hearth and an axe rings out. The second section, called "The Immigrant," is a synthesis of regional and family history, placing Davidson in the long line of descent from the remote Vikings—"Urging the deep bone back to the viking wave"—who first crossed the Atlantic to the New World, followed by the Scottish Highlanders who were his immediate forebears, and singling out one in particular, Andrew Davidson, described in the dedication as "a Pioneer of Southwest Virginia and of Bedford County, Tennessee" (not, by the way, the Davidson for whom Davidson County surrounding Nashville is named), who is pictured as "the man of flints and pelts" who has come "from croft and chapel, glen and strath." To Davidson this Scottish immigrant

is the patriarch of his line, distinguished from all the rest because he holds in memory the defeat of the Scottish clansmen by the English soldiers in the Battle of Culloden in the Highlands in 1745, a hundred years before the Civil War in which southern Confederates were defeated by northern Unionists. To Davidson the Scottish broadsword (or "claymore") has rusted and the bagpipe (or "pibroch") has been silenced after the Battle of Culloden, just as in his view the southerners have been silenced after Appomattox, so that they seem to have gone from one defeat to another. But its message is not gloomy, because it sees a healthy fusion of the European immigrants in the American descendants, "Since we together, Gael and Gaul,/Palatine, Huguenot, came in company/And washed the old bitter wars in the salt sea." The final section of "Hermitage" is called "In Blue-Stocking Hollow," and it is a forward-looking conclusion to the story of the pioneer settlers, which pictures them in a new territory, having made the passage from Virginia to Tennessee, "where blue tidewater laps our greener land," recalling those earlier immigrants celebrated in Michael Drayton's Elizabethan poem, "Ode to the Virginian Voyage," who knew both the buffalo gods of the American Indians and the classical Greek gods of the Trojan War. Davidson names some of the creatures of the wilderness as well, the "hoodless eagles of the new-world skies" and the "wild geese" and the "screech-owl" which are part of the natural landscape he has inherited from his pioneer ancestors. His poem concludes with an admonition to the younger generation to be loyal to past generations who established their homestead, spoken by a "graybeard" who may be Andrew Davidson, the family patriarch, or Donald Davidson himself, since both the earlier and younger generations are part of what the poem calls "the folk-chain" of kinsmen running through the length of history, "the time of man." The poem ends formally and ritually, with a solemn vow: "Peace be to all who keep the wilderness./Cursed be the child who lets the freehold pass."

"Sanctuary" and "Hermitage" are Davidson's finest poems

about the antebellum and postbellum South as he imagined it. There loyalty to family and to the land persist in spite of the devastation and defeat of the Civil War. But as a true southerner he wrote about the Civil War itself, the unforgotten four short years of the Confederacy with its unrealized dream of an independent southern nation, most memorably in "The Last Charge" and "Lee in the Mountains." Of the two, "Lee in the Mountains" is the better known, and deserves to be, because it is Davidson's tribute to the chief southern hero, General Robert E. Lee, while "The Last Charge" is about a less glamorous general, John Bell Hood, who led the Confederates in the Battle of Nashville, which many historians regard as the last major conflict of the Civil War. But these poems belong together, I think, as do "Sanctuary" and "Hermitage," because they tell the story of the Civil War and its aftermath better than any other narrative poems—better in that one respect than Allen Tate's more famous "Ode to the Confederate Dead," the major Civil War poem of the South, which is not a narrative but a meditation on death with a cemetery as its setting. Together Davidson's "The Last Charge" and "Lee in the Mountains" commemorate the southern defeat by condensing it into two dramatic scenes—the first a particular battle scene graphically described as it happened, and the second a quiet scene of retreat and reflection after all the battles are over.

"The Last Charge" is told long after the battle too, but it centers on the battle scene as a remembered final charge, when the Army of Tennessee under General Hood came from south of Nashville, after the bloody Battle of Franklin, to attack the entrenched Union Army fortified inside the city, where "the town/Waits in the Federal lines." Today there are memorial plaques all around Nashville commemorating this futile battle that Davidson reenacted poetically. "The Last Charge" is his most fully imagined poem about the city where he lived most of his life, where he knew all the places named in the poem, such as Winstead Hill, the McGavock House, and Harpeth Valley. He wrote a short and memorable poem,

“Twilight on Union Street,” as a brief tribute to Andrew Jackson and the Nashville that existed before the war; but “The Last Charge” is a more powerful narrative about Nashville as an occupied city, ravaged by the final major offensive of the Confederate army, which attempted unsuccessfully to wrest it from its conquerors, a gallant effort that was doomed to fail. The Army of Tennessee is rallied one last time in words that Davidson packs with emotion:

These have marched
To the sound of guns in swamps and wilderness,
Bled, retreated, rallied, charged again;
And now the viking arm of Hood, berserk,
Sweeps north at last: One great charge more, my brothers!
Rake the South free from burnt Atlanta’s walls
North to Ohio, east to the camps of Lee,
Till the red hand of Sherman marches in vain.
One charge, the last!

Such is Hood’s command to the Army of Tennessee as it begins its fatal march northward:

Ranks march slowly at first,
Guiding center, watching the colors slant.
White and red among dusty trees, the town
Waits in the Federal lines. Batteries open
From hills beyond the river. Figures run
Among the poplars where a cotton gin
Clusters the flags that wave up death.
The charge quickens, they see the enemy now,
And, rushing, fill the valley with their high
Resentful hunt-cry as they mount the slope.
The Army of Tennessee knows how to charge!

One could almost believe this battle is going to be won, so impelling is Davidson’s description of it, but of course the outcome is defeat, and the poem ends with a formal “Farewell,/

Army of Tennessee,” and a wintry scene—the Battle of Nashville really did take place in a December ice storm—surrounds the fallen and retreating Confederate soldiers whom Hood urged into a losing battle against superior numbers of well-fortified Union troops.

“Lee in the Mountains,” the companion piece that is probably Davidson’s best known poem, is about the final chapter of the Civil War. In it Davidson tells the story of the defeated general, who, after his humiliating surrender at Appomattox, accepted a post as president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, his last public service. He performed the service so well that the college was renamed Washington & Lee University, and the general is buried in a vault on the campus. During the five years, from 1865 to 1870, when Lee was president, he had much time to reflect on the war and its consequences; and the portrait Davidson paints of him in the poem is as fine a character study as has been made by any historian. Just as we know Julius Caesar, the victorious Roman general, best in the tragedy about him written in Elizabethan English by Shakespeare, so it might be said that we know Robert E. Lee, the defeated southern general, best in Davidson’s modern American poem. Davidson dared to have Lee himself speak in the first person, but the voice is believable and consistent throughout the poem. He is no longer the gray-uniformed commander of the Army of Northern Virginia astride a horse, but “Robert Lee in a dark civilian suit” who walks to his office, an outlaw in his own country. He remembers how his father, the celebrated Light Horse Harry Lee, had commanded a regiment in the American Revolution, but had refused to fight again in the War of 1812 and exiled himself instead to the West Indies, leaving his forsaken family behind, “And he rode out, a broken man.” Lee feels sympathy with his father in defeat, but he will not exile himself; instead he continues to believe that “The fortune of the Lees goes with the land,” and he will honor his father by remaining in Virginia after the war has been lost. He knows that the college boys will soon forget the “sacred cause” of southern rebellion, which later generations will only read about in books:

The rest must pass to men who never knew
(But on a written page) the strike of armies,
And never heard the long Confederate cry
Charge through the muzzling smoke or saw the bright
Eyes of the beardless boys go up to death.

Davidson's Lee looks out, from the mountains to which he has come at the end of his life, and sees the native country he loves: "The Shenandoah is golden with new grain./The Blue Ridge, crowned with a haze of light,/Thunders no more." And he realizes that many will believe he betrayed his country by leading the rebellious army of the Confederacy, but he believes he was being loyal to it, because it was Virginia he fought for, his own land, and because he has made up his mind to endure the surrender manfully if sorrowfully, taking full responsibility for what he has done:

Without arms or men I stand, but with knowledge only,
I face what long I saw, before others knew,
When Pickett's men streamed back, and I heard the tangled
Cry of the Wilderness wounded, bloody with doom.

The note Davidson strikes for Lee is that of courage in defeat, of a man who bears his wounds stoically and whose spirit is undaunted, since "Lee is in mountains now, beyond Appomattox," resigning himself to defeat with the thought that "I am alone,/Trapped, consenting, taken at last in mountains." The setting of the poem becomes its justification, for the mountains are symbols of strength and endurance and solitude, all in Lee's mind as he faces the end. Furthermore Lee is imbued with the faith of his fathers, which makes him believe that wars come under the final judgment of God, and that "the God of your fathers is a just/And merciful God" who "measures out the grace/Whereby alone we live," and so as a man of faith he can face defeat and death willingly, since he fully expects to be judged for better or worse by a power that transcends human fallibility and mortality and is able to view the motives of men truly,

Never forsaking, never denying
His children and His children's children forever
Unto all generations of the faithful heart.

Davidson's portrait of Lee in his last years is a psychological study of character that goes beyond any historian's retelling of the events of the Civil War and beyond any biographer's analysis of the man who, to many familiar with the history of the Civil War, seemed in defeat more noble than the general who forced him to surrender. There are many portraits of Robert E. Lee, but none more compelling than Davidson's story, told in Lee's own words and from his point of view.

The art of storytelling in Davidson's hands is well exemplified by his poetry, especially by the five poems here considered, which are among his most original and lasting works. We must not forget the two volumes of *The Tennessee*, which have long been regarded as the best of the Rivers of America series, words of which are now appropriately engraved on the Bicentennial Fountain below the old capitol in Nashville. Nor should we forget his novel, *The Big Ballad Jamboree*, his most extended narrative work and his sole work of fiction. Davidson never had the satisfaction of seeing it into print, but it belongs among the works for which he will be remembered best. It is as original in its way as his poems, and it deserves an honored place beside the work of the Fugitives whose novels are better known: Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, and Andrew Lytle's *The Velvet Horn*. Those novels are tragic, while Davidson's novel is comic but equally impressive. *The Big Ballad Jamboree* is a story about country musicians told by one of them in his own rustic dialect, and it links the "folk-chain" Davidson wrote about in "Hermitage," all the way from its origins in the ballads of the British Isles to the oral tradition of the southern Appalachian "mountain singers," and even down to the country-western stars of Music City, as Nashville is today, "Home of the Grand Ole Opry."

Davidson managed to keep his fictive storytelling gifts to himself while teaching others how to write, but when his

novel at last appeared in 1996 it showed conclusively that he could do the sort of things he had praised in the best fiction of his contemporaries. The Davidson of *The Big Ballad Jamboree* is a colloquial humorist in the American tradition that links Mark Twain with William Faulkner, and even with Ernest Hemingway, who once said that American literature begins with *Huckleberry Finn*. Davidson's novel is American in that sense, a spoken tale, worded in the speech of ordinary people; and no writer has used the colloquial tradition more effectively than Davidson does. Moreover no one has written better than Davidson about American country music, which today enjoys a worldwide audience and is amazingly popular everywhere.

Davidson's novel is set in 1949, when country music was just coming into its own on the radio, and the plot of the novel centers on the characters of Danny MacGregor and Cissy Timberlake, country people from the hills and hollows of the southern Appalachians near a fictional place called Carolina City. Danny, the narrator of the novel, plays the guitar and composes songs, and Cissy, his girlfriend, sings them with his band, which goes by the name of the Turkey Hollow Boys. But Cissy is ambitious and wants to become a scholar of ballads (like Davidson himself), and so she goes off to New York City to study, leaving Danny behind to look after the Old MacGregor Place he has inherited from his family, which he finds it hard to support by farming (a clue that Agrarianism serves better as a philosophy than as a means of making a living). He joins the Turkey Hollow Boys, led by a musician named Rufus, to keep from losing the family farm, though he really would rather sing for his family and friends than for a radio audience he never sees, as he makes clear in his own words early in the novel:

There's money in the new songs if you are willing to put on a hillbilly outfit and stand up to the mike and do what Rufus tells you. And go where he books you, Saturday nights and other nights and noons, even early mornings if Rufus says go. Look like you're pleased to be there,

too, and having a big time singing, no matter how you feel. It wouldn't work any other way, and, truth is, you do have a big time. It's the music does it. It's the world's wonder how it takes hold of you. . . .

And the main part of the money comes from the new songs. You got to keep making up new songs for your own crowd, and you got to know the new songs that others make up and that are ketching on. You got to know what folks will like before they know it themselves. And you got to like it yourself, too, else you won't have no heart to sing it.

But of course the old songs are the best. I knew it all the time, down deep inside. The trouble is, they don't hardly ever ketch on in the record shops or amongst the jukeboxes.

Though reluctant to commercialize his talent, Danny is successful enough to earn a name for himself as one of the Turkey Hollow Boys. When Cissy comes back to Carolina City as a serious teacher of ballads and gets a job in the state college, she consents to go on singing with Danny and his band. But she is a ballad scholar and teacher as well, and she finds a fellow back in the hills named Buck Kennedy who knows many of the old ballads she wants to collect, setting up a rivalry between Danny and Buck that becomes a love triangle and forms the main plot of the novel. The climax is the Big Ballad Jamboree, a singing fest on the campus where Cissy teaches, with Buck Kennedy featured as a soloist, doing the old-time ballads Danny loves, but which Danny can't sing commercially with the Turkey Hollow Boys because they are too "long-hair," in other words too serious for the audience. In the wild outcome of this rivalry, Buck is exposed as a bootlegger making illegal money from his still while Danny remains the loyal assistant to Cissy in her class on the ballad. There is suspense about which boyfriend Cissy will choose, until the final episode; but then the choice is clear, and she promises Danny that she will go on teaching and singing while

he plays and composes, and together they will perform "the good country music, both the old and the new."

Davidson's novel is thus critical of commercial exploitation, yet it takes a broadly optimistic view of American country music, which when Davidson was writing his novel in the 1950s was looked on as too provincial for wide popularity, especially with sophisticated city audiences, but which by the 1990s, when the novel was finally published, had fulfilled all the best hopes of its performers and fans. And so the novel seems not only a permanent fictional portrayal of country music at its best, but Davidson's comic treatment of it appears justified. Davidson's novel exemplifies the best of the oral tradition from which country music came and anticipates its eventual success as a widely popular art. Davidson even composed some quite believable original lyrics for his country singers to sing, notably "White Roses on My Mother's Grave," a happy-sad ballad in the familiar mode of American country music, the mode that, when the novel finally appeared, was attracting listeners throughout the world.

For Donald Davidson to be the author of a novel about country music seems more than mere coincidence, since the Fugitives got their start in Nashville, the only southern city where the high art of poetry and the popular art of country music emerged side by side. It was Davidson, of all the Fugitive poets, who understood best how to combine the high art of poetry and the popular art of country music through the perennial art of storytelling. His winning synthesis of these arts deserves greater recognition, and it may some day come to pass, for if Nashville today can claim to be the "Home of the Grand Ole Opry," tomorrow it may well claim to be the "Home of the Fugitive Poets."